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Egypt got Soviet A-arms in '73, ex-aide says

Washington (Reuter) — The Soviet Union sent nuclear weapons to Egypt during the 1973 Yom Kippur war against Israel, retired U.S. Air Force Gen. George Keegan said yesterday.

General Keegan, who as director of air intelligence evaluated top secret intelligence during the war, told reporters that the weapons were sent after initial victories by Egypt and Syria had been reversed and Israel was winning.

The general, at a press conference sponsored by the Center for International Security to talk about the recent Soviet military build-up in Syria,

said U.S. intelligence spotted a Soviet freighter moving from a Black Sea port towards Egypt in mid-October, 1973.

Intelligence data showed the ship "absolutely contained nuclear weapons," General Keegan said. The ship anchored off Alexandria and "put out a magnetic anomaly protection boom around the ship" to guard against electronic snooping, he said.

After 2½ days, the ship returned home. General Keegan said: "I saw the data with my own eyes ... which clearly indicated the nuclear weapons had been removed."

At about the same time that the ship arrived off Egypt, General Keegan said, U.S. intelligence observed a brigade of Soviet officers of the Strategic Rocket Forces arriving at Cairo International Airport.

"We saw the airplanes that brought them unload what appeared to be special warheads for the Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles which had been introduced with great urgency," he said.

The warheads could also have been used to deliver deadly nerve gas against the Israelis, whose army had crossed the Suez Canal and was then within 50 miles of Cairo, he said.

General Keegan said that the Nixon administration used Israeli fears that the Egyptians had been given nuclear weapons to convince the Israeli cabinet to order a halt to the tanks that were on the verge of capturing Cairo and Damascus.

Asked about the recent Soviet installation of SA-5 anti-aircraft missiles in Syria, General Keegan said: "If I were an Israeli prime minister, I would say Israel now has no choice but to go in and destroy those ... sites."